Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership by Rogers M. Smith
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Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership *by Rogers M. Smith. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003. 248 pp. Cloth, $60.00; paper, $22.00.*

Our moral prescriptions should be informed by our knowledge of the world. Informed by this commitment, Rogers Smith explores how political communities have been constituted through discourses of membership in order to advance a moral argument about the kinds of stories that *should* be cultivated in order to produce a more just and democratic world (p. 174). The resulting book, *Stories of Peoplehood*, joins a scholarly "is" to a pragmatic political "should."

In Smith's analysis, stories of peoplehood are linked to "projects that aim to construct communities that are also enduring structures of political power" (p. 41). He begins by characterizing two dimensions of variation that can be recovered from extensive literatures in history, political science, sociology, and anthropology. First, stories differ in their strength and scope, in the claims for the primacy of a particular allegiance and the range of activities over which that allegiance holds. Strong and wide stories are intolerant of difference and demand allegiance across many domains of life; weak and narrow stories may not constitute a community of sufficient power to get the job done, to provide for security and material well-being. Second, peoples may be constituted through three different types of narratives—economic, political, and ethically constitutive—which may be woven together to construct political communities and to advance partisan elite interests (p. 69). While acknowledging the importance of economic and political narratives, the aim of the first half of *Stories of Peoplehood* is to make a case for the distinctive importance of ethically constitutive stories.

In contrast to stories that appeal to either material wealth or to the quest for (and maintenance of) power, ethically constitutive stories are particularly effective and particularly dangerous. In addition to providing powerful accounts of membership and individual worth, these stories are less-easily undermined by evidence than are accounts of material prosperity, which can be undone by shortage, or narratives of power, which can falter with defeats and insecurity (pp. 99–100). Consequently, ethically constitutive stories may sustain peoplehood even when wealth and security are absent, are secured illegitimately, or are threatened by change.

These qualities of ethically constitutive stories of peoplehood frame the moral challenge confronted by Smith: "If ethically constitutive stories are inescapably an integral element of all processes of political people-making, and hence of all political life, what do we do about their obvious potential to define and advance viciously unjust political projects?" (p. 125). Above all, he argues, we should not ignore this potential. Whereas many contemporary political philosophers offer visions of universal or rational or procedural democracy that seek to encompass differences within institutional or communicative

commitments, Smith offers a more muscular approach. Rather than suppressing particularism or reserving it for marginalized groups, he advocates a Madisonian approach in which proponents of different constitutive accounts actively engage one another, challenging each other's stories. Smith's own candidate for a "story of American peoplehood" features a "pioneering people," an account that can be nested in an identification with the history of the nation as well as in an aspirationally universal understanding of human history as experiment and change: "A century and a half after Darwin, it now seems clear to all but the most traditionalist fundamentalists that humanity is plausibly understood as a highly evolved and still evolving animate species" (p. 166). Both the attraction of history and the potential of evolution to serve as a universal narrative frame may reveal the particular preferences of a contemporary academic and understate the difficulties of crafting an account that will not marginalize the considerable number of "traditionalist fundamentalists" who find the concept of evolution more than a bit problematic. But with his own thought experiment, Smith challenges others to offer different candidates for constitutive stories.

As befits Smith's commitment to an empirically informed normative theory, his prescriptions for ethically constitutive stories and discourses of peoplemaking also set a new agenda for scholarship. What can we learn about the cosmopolitan societies of the past, those that encompassed multiple religious or ethnic affinities within a single system of rule? We should pay particular attention to the processes by which such cosmopolitan "settlements" fail and, more hopefully, to the erosion of overly strong, exclusionary, and vicious stories of peoplehood and the regimes that they sustain.

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Benjamin Franklin: An American Life *by Walter Isaacson. Riverside, NJ, Simon & Schuster, 2003. 608 pp. Cloth, $30.00; paper, $16.95.*

In the two hundred years since Benjamin Franklin's death, almost every conceivable sort of book about him has been written. His public life has drawn historians and biographers to his politics, his diplomacy, and his involvement in the cities of colonial America and in the empire of Great Britain. Studies of his mind and scientific achievements abound, as do those that look at him as a family man and lover. His friends and enemies, his community service, his religion, his humor, even his prose style, have also received careful scrutiny.

Many of these books have brought illumination into the life of Franklin and his time. General studies—large-scale biographies—have proved less successful, as only a handful have succeeded in pulling together much that is reliable in what has been written about him into a rounded life. The greatest of all of these books is Carl Van Doren's *Benjamin Franklin*, published in 1938. Van Doren's is much longer than Walter Isaacson's, covers more ground, and